

Don't forget militias in Afghanistan

By Rep. Mike Coffman THE DENVER POST POSTED: 12/20/2009

The week before President Barack Obama delivered his speech at West Point announcing he would order 30,000 more U.S. troops to Afghanistan, I traveled to Kabul as part of a small congressional delegation.

Upon arrival, we met with Gen. Stanley McChrystal to review the security challenges in Afghanistan. Our discussion focused on his plan to reverse the current momentum of the Taliban in order to create a stable environment and allow for the political process to move forward. I left the meeting wanting to believe in the general and wanting to believe in our mission.

I am not new to the military and know how complex and difficult it is to conduct counterinsurgency operations. In 2005, I resigned from my elected position as Colorado's state treasurer and returned to the U.S. Marine Corps for an assignment in Iraq, where I worked as a civil affairs officer supporting Iraqi elections. Later, I helped establish interim local governments in the Western Euphrates River Valley. When I was in Iraq, I saw the security situation deteriorate as the country descended into sectarian violence.

Faced with a dangerously destabilized environment in 2007, President George W. Bush turned to his commander on the ground, Gen. David Petraeus, for an assessment of what it would take to turn the tide. Petraeus requested an increase of 20,000 troops. In addition to that "surge," he altered the strategy for troop deployment. The combined strategy of deploying additional forces and pushing troops out into the population provided an increased level of security and enabled the stalled political process in Iraq to move forward. Today, the surge strategy is commonly viewed as having been successful.

However, one important element often overlooked when evaluating the success of the surge in Iraq was Gen. Petraeus enlisting the help of the Sunni Arab tribal militias, many of whom were former insurgents, to fight the al-Qaeda forces. Those militia members initially received weapons and were paid by the U.S. military. This strategy was particularly critical in al Anbar province, considered the heart of the Sunni Arab insurgency. The event became known as the "Sunni Awakening," and I believe it may have been just as significant in turning the tide in the war as the troop surge itself.

During a discussion about training the Afghan army, a senior U.S. military adviser candidly shared his frustrations about how hard it is to train young Afghan men for military service. He explained why aspects of Afghan culture made the adjustment to military life and our mission to stand up a national army more challenging and difficult than anticipated.

I found his frustrations surprising. Afghans clearly know how to fight. They have battled the Persians, Greeks, Mauryans, Huns, Mongols, Moghuls, the British and the Soviets. I reminded the officer that in 2001, it was the Afghan opposition forces — known as the "Northern Alliance" — that toppled the Taliban's brutal hold on the country in a few short months with only tactical air, logistical and advisory support from the United States. They fought as a collection of tribal militias and not as a disciplined conventional military organization.

When I asked Gen. McChrystal and officers from his training staff about opportunities that paralleled our experiences in Iraq mobilizing the tribal militias, they informed me that Afghan President Hamid Karzai's government is opposed to the arming of militias. No doubt, the Karzai government is concerned such an action would compromise the legitimacy of a nascent central government's role in securing the country and that at some point those same well-armed tribal militias might in turn challenge the authority of the central government in Kabul.

I reminded them that Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki had similar opposition to arming and supporting the Sunni Arab tribal militias in Iraq, yet we went forward despite the protests — and the program proved to be highly effective in helping root out al-Qaeda in Iraq.

Although the use of tribal militias in Afghanistan may not be the answer to defeating the Taliban, it should not be overlooked. It may very well be a key part of the solution, and anything that can help bring this war to a just conclusion must be fully explored.

In the coming weeks and months, I will continue to press the Obama administration to make sure that it is.

U.S. Rep. Mike Coffman represents Colorado's 6th Congressional District.

